

An Archaeological Dig in the Classroom

Concept:

Learners will participate in a mock archaeological excavation of an imaginary Northwest Coast village site. This activity will involve a fully laid out excavation, replicated in the classroom by a marked 10m x 10m area, subdivided into 1m x 1m segments in which plastic storage bins will be placed, filled with sand and buried “artifacts”.

These bins will be positioned at varying heights, some will be on the ground while others will be situated on boxes and desks; the purpose being to add stratigraphic and chronological complexity to the activity.

Students will then utilize professional archaeological strategies to excavate the storage bins, recording all finds in three-dimensional detail and creating an assemblage database. After completion of the excavation, learners will then examine the data and utilise “evidence and interpretation” (one of the Big 6 historical thinking practises) to determine what area of the village they were excavating. In other words, from an analysis of the artifacts, the learners should be able to state whether a household, midden, burial ground, and/or tool quarry were identified or existed at the location.

Additionally, as the depth below datum of each artifact will have been recorded, students will also be able to potentially create a chronology for the artifacts; this will allow them to also explore “continuity and change”, another of the Big 6.

Content Standard Connections:

The activity will focus on the Grade 5 Social Studies curricular content of *First Peoples land ownership and use*; focusing on Aboriginal groups in the Northwest Coast area. This content can be elaborated to specific Aboriginal land use such as burial grounds, housing, hunting, and fishing. Additionally, this material can also be related to BC’s treaty process as archaeological evidence often provides evidence for First Nation land claims.

Staging:

This activity is to be developed over several lessons. A grounding in archaeology and Northwest Coast Aboriginal culture will be required before the actual excavation exercise. The excavation itself will likely engage students for an entire day. Data analysis and report writing will be assigned to the final lesson. Before the lessons begin, students will be sent home with an equipment list. These will include: old paintbrush, garden trowel, tape measure, ruler, and

personal phone (if available). Those students who cannot find the equipment will be able to borrow it on the day.

Here is the basic flow of activities:

Lesson 1

- Learners will first be introduced to BC's Heritage Conservation Act and the role of the Archaeology Branch in safeguarding the province's heritage. Primarily, students will learn that archaeology is a science and that personal excavation of sites is not only illegal but detrimental to the understanding of our collective past.
- Students will begin to explore the settlement patterns of the Aboriginal peoples who inhabited Vancouver Island between 10,000 and 1,000 B.P., examining seasonal habitation patterns and the strategies they employed in subsistence, war, and trade. Additional time will be given to cover social organization, hierarchies, and personal ornamental adornment.
- As an example of the physical layout of Aboriginal communities, the Snuneymuxw village site and burial ground located at Departure Bay will be examined in detail through accessing the RAAD catalogue. The types of assemblages will be covered with visual representations provided of the artifacts and potential site features such as postholes and hearths.

Lesson 2

- An introduction to basic excavation techniques will furnish the learners with the skills needed to carefully uncover the replica artifacts, record them in situ, photograph if necessary, and then catalogue them according to testpit location inside the site grid.
- This introduction will be a hands on experience, with learners working in groups of two to excavate a storage bin that will be filled with sand and one artifact. They will learn the required techniques for the later full excavation such as gradual trowelling, measuring the x,y,z positions of the artifact, and how to correctly fill in in the test pit data sheet and drawing.
- The post-excavation process will be explained, highlighting to students how important the collected data is for developing a strong final report that is defined by the critical analysis of the assemblage and feature layout.
- Potentially view this introductory video to archaeology:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSwCYm9qC6c>

Lesson 3

- The excavation: Learners will have been prepared for the day and will come prepared with all the required equipment and understanding that this will be a full day activity. On arrival in the class, they will find the "site" already laid out in the classroom with

tape and string showing the dimensions and test pit grids. They will already have been assigned roles in the excavation depending on their interests and skills. These will include: surveyors, photographers, excavators, cataloguers, and sitemappers. Each will be aware of their assigned role. Additionally, a strict protocol will be in place for dealing with any spillage of the sand from the storage bins.

- The excavation will proceed and follow a defined time schedule. Students from other classrooms will be invited to visit the excavation in small numbers to view the work and ask relevant questions.
- By end of the day, all the materials will have been excavated, catalogued and stored. The test pit data sheets will have been examined and collected. The final site map will have been completely updated. All photographs will have been downloaded. The excavation equipment will have been cleaned up and any messes removed.

Lesson 4

- Working in assigned groups, the learners will begin to examine the final data, which will be provided to them as copies of the original. A critical thinking framework will help guide the groups as they grapple with the information and work towards developing a hypothesis as to the nature of the site. They will be asked to develop theories as to the type of site, whether it was seasonally inhabited, the age of the site, and the different social roles observable from the collected assemblage.
- The groups will have access to the map, artifacts photos, and datasheets so they may develop their own personal final reports. Additionally, they will be asked to develop a timeline for the site showing the potential dates of occupation.
- The final reports will be handed in and be part of the individual learners assessment which will also have included anecdotal notes from their work during the excavation.

Materials:

- Tape and string to layout the site. A set datum will be created in the classroom from where the students will be able to record the depths of uncovered artifacts.
- Personal excavation equipment: pencils, tape measure, ruler, graph paper, data sheet, and builder's level.
- Storage bins that will act as parts of the test pits; filled with sand collected from beach.
- Replica microblades and arrowheads, chert flakes or depleted cores, salmon bones, copper plates, dentalia shells, replica labrets, limited land mammal bones, clam and oyster shell, charcoal for hearth, wooden blocks to represent postholes.
- Camera or cellphones.